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SPORT



Balancing act! Bangladesh's 19-year-old Wonderboy Farhaan Ali Wahid cushions the ball on his head as Hamza Choudhury, Jamal Bhuyan, Tariq Kazi, and Bishwanath Ghosh watch on during yesterday's training. Fresh off a dazzling solo goal in the 4-0 rout of Sri Lanka, the electric left-winger will be out to weave more of that same magic against Pakistan in the SAFF Championship semifinal today as Bangladesh chase a fourth final. PHOTO: **FIROZ AHMED**

Dooley meets Maradona's 'Little Master' again

KHALID HOSSAIN

When Thomas Dooley and Nolberto Solano take their places in the technical areas at the National Stadium tonight, two former international midfielders turned tacticians will face off in a high-stakes SAFF Championship semifinal. Although their playing careers overlapped for years and bridged the turn of the millennium, the two crossed paths only once on the pitch, making their Dhaka touchline meeting a rare reunion decades in the making.

Appointed in May, Bangladesh head coach Dooley carries a pedigree shaped by his own dual-national journey. Born in West Germany to an American serviceman father and a German mother, he won the 1991 Bundesliga with Kaiserslautern and the 1997 UEFA Cup with Schalke 04 before US head coach Bora Milutinovic recruited him ahead of the 1994 World Cup.

Dooley went on to earn 81 caps and score seven goals for the US between 1992 and 1999, playing every minute on home soil in 1994 and captaining the side at France 1998 -- achievements that secured his 2004 National Soccer Hall of Fame induction.

His experience as a dual-national player later shaped his coaching blueprint. Across two stints with the Philippines in 2014--2018 and 2022, he systematically integrated European-born diaspora players, orchestrating a famous 3-2 World Cup qualifying upset over North Korea and guiding the Azkals to their first-ever AFC Asian Cup qualification in 2018 before bringing that template to Bangladesh, guiding a backline that navigated the SAFF group stage without conceding a single goal.

Opposite him stands Solano, the Peruvian attacking midfielder who became a cult hero at Newcastle United for his crossing and dead-ball mastery. Having earned the nickname El Maestrito -- "The Little Master" -- from Diego Maradona during their Boca Juniors days, Solano became the first Peruvian to play in the Premier League in 1998. Across more than 300 appearances in English football for Newcastle United, Aston Villa, West Ham United, Leicester City and Hull City, he tallied 49 goals and 62 assists.

Capped 95 times by Peru, scoring 20 goals between 1994 and 2009, Solano transitioned into coaching as Ricardo Gareca's assistant from 2015 to 2022, helping end Peru's 36-year World Cup drought in 2018 and reach the 2019 Copa America final. After coaching spells at clubs in Peru, Sweden and England, as well as managing Peru's U-23 side, he took charge of Pakistan in July 2025, inheriting a programme disrupted by repeated FIFA suspensions and without a domestic Premier League since 2018-19.

Between 1996 and 1998, their international careers overlapped across three USA-Peru friendlies, though they shared the pitch only once. Solano played and scored in Peru's 4-1 Lima win in October 1996, and both missed Peru's 1-0 San Diego victory in January 1997, before Dooley captained the US to a 1-0 win over a Solano-featuring Peru in Miami in February 1998.

Twenty-eight years on, their paths cross again under the Dhaka lights, with a SAFF final berth on the line.



PHOTO: PFF

Bangladesh's fourth or Pakistan's first?

A blockbuster 'final' beckons

SPORTS REPORTER

Former champions Bangladesh stand one win away from their first SAFF Championship final since 2005, but a resurgent Pakistan, strengthened by an influx of European-based players, stand in their way when the two sides meet in Saturday's second semifinal at the National Stadium.

The match kicks off at 8:30pm, following the first semifinal between holders India and dark horses Bhutan at 3:30pm.

For Bangladesh, it is a chance to move within one win of a second regional title following their only triumph, coming at home in 2003, sandwiched between two final appearances, and six group-stage exits in the last eight editions.

This time, however, Thomas Dooley's side have given supporters reason to dream. Backed by overseas-based players, including Sheffield United midfielder Hamza Choudhury, Bangladesh topped Group A, scoring five goals and conceding none. Their emphatic 4-0 win over Sri Lanka on Wednesday, following an earlier victory over Bhutan, has given them all the necessary momentum before a fixture which Bangladesh head coach Thomas Dooley has labelled "the final".

Pakistan, meanwhile, have made an uneven but encouraging start under coach Nolberto Solano. They pushed defending champions India close in a 3-2 defeat after trailing 3-0, then bounced back with a 3-0 win over former champions Maldives. Their resilience was also evident in September, when they came from two goals down to draw 2-2 with a higher-ranked Philippines side in the FIFA ASEAN Cup.

Their campaign has been shaped by the late arrival of five overseas-based regulars -- Abdullah Iqbal, Easah Suliman, Adil Nabi, Abdul Samad Arshad and Ali Akbar Khan -- who missed the group stage because it fell outside the FIFA international window.

Sweden-based Iqbal and former England youth international Suliman, who plays in Azerbaijan, strengthen the backline alongside Iqbal, while Nabi, a West Bromwich Albion academy product who plies his trade in Greece, adds creativity in midfield. Denmark-based Abdul Samad offers another attacking option, with six-foot-two Ali Akbar providing a further presence up front. How quickly the newly arrived players can settle into the side, however, remains a question.

Pakistan's push for a maiden title comes against a difficult domestic backdrop, having been devoid of top-tier action since the 2018-19 season and faced multiple FIFA suspensions since 2017, the latest of which was lifted in March last year.

FIFA RANKING
Bangladesh: 182
Pakistan: 197

HEAD-TO-HEAD
Bangladesh: 7
Pakistan: 6
Draw: 4

IN SAFF C'SHIP:
Bangladesh: 3
Pakistan: 2
Draw: 2

They have struggled to make the final despite reaching the semifinals on several occasions. Maldives and Bangladesh eliminated them in 2003 and 2005 respectively, while India knocked them out in 1997 and 2018. They have reached the last four in Dhaka on three of their previous four visits, but this will be their first semifinal against hosts Bangladesh.

In their last 10 encounters spanning three decades, Bangladesh won four times, drew five and lost once. Bangladesh won 1-0 in 2018, the last time the two teams met. Dooley, however, is well aware of the quality Pakistan's reinforcements bring. "They [Pakistan] also have incredible football knowledge because they are playing at a higher level in Europe," Dooley told reporters before yesterday's training session at Bashundhara Kings Arena.

The Bangladesh coach, however, is confident his players can reproduce the intensity they showed against Sri Lanka. "We just have to do the same thing. We have to show the fans that we can play football... and that's what we have to show Pakistan too."

Bangladesh are expected to retain the balance that served them well against Sri Lanka, with Hamza, Shamit Shome and Quazem Shah central to their midfield control and left-forward Farhaan Ali Wahid looking to build on his outstanding solo goal. The hosts will, however, have to adjust their backline following Saad Uddin's injury, which ruled the right-back out of the tournament.

The introduction of Video Assistant Referee (VAR) for the knockout rounds adds another dimension to a contest that promises to be physical and closely fought.

With Bangladesh seeking a return to the final and Pakistan chasing a historic first under the glare of the Dhaka floodlights, the stage is set for a "final" before the final, where desperation, diaspora ambition and tactical moves collide.



"Obviously if you are more rested it helps. But this game is, for us, a final because I think Pakistan are one of the best teams."

THOMAS DOOLEY, Bangladesh coach

"There's a lot of talk about Hamza Choudhury, but we have Abdullah Iqbal, Easah Suliman, Adil Nabi, and Abdul Arshad. They're amazing players."

YOUSUF IJAZ BUTT, Pakistan goalkeeper

Mosaddeak proves value of defined role

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

For Rangpur Division wicketkeeper-batter Mim Mosaddeak, success in first-class cricket has been a long time coming.

After making his debut in 2017, the 31-year-old managed just three appearances until 2022, with established names such as Dhiman Ghosh, Litton Das and Akbar Ali ahead of him in the wicketkeeping pecking order. A star-studded batting line-up further restricted his opportunities.

Even when he finally featured in six of Rangpur's seven matches last season, Mosaddeak managed only 222 runs at an average of 18.50. An unsettled batting position was a major obstacle, as he was frequently moved between opening and the lower middle order.

"When I started playing, I couldn't bat in a fixed position. Sometimes I opened, sometimes I batted at seven or five. My batting position was never settled," he told The Daily Star.

This season, however, everything fell into place. Given a consistent opportunity to open throughout the National Cricket League (NCL), Mosaddeak delivered the best first-class campaign of his career, scoring 727 runs in 12 innings at an average of 60.58. He emerged as the competition's leading run-scorer heading into the final round, with three centuries



PHOTO: **BCB**

and four half-centuries, registering at least one fifty in every match he played.

His performances were particularly valuable for a depleted Rangpur side. One of his finest contributions came against Chattogram in Khulna, where he scored 145 off 317 balls on the final day, rescuing his team from defeat and securing a draw.

"We were completely on the back foot, and the situation was such that if I got out, we would lose the match. So I tried to bat with patience. For me, that innings has been the best one so far," he said.

His breakthrough was even more remarkable considering the injury setback he faced before the tournament. Mosaddeak fractured his leg while playing football during a warm-up session, just before a three-week fitness camp and the subsequent fitness test. Doctors initially warned that he might not be able to play.

"I recovered to some extent about a week before the fitness test. I somehow passed the test and started practising, but I couldn't prepare properly. I had only around a week to get ready before the tournament," he said.

Another important factor was finally finding a fixed role. Although primarily an opener, Mosaddeak also took over wicketkeeping duties after Akbar Ali left for Nepal following the first three matches. He kept wickets in two games, including against Barishal in Sylhet, where he scored 77 and 121 despite spending nearly 100 overs behind the stumps.

After discussing his role with coach Nazmul Hossain, Mosaddeak made it clear that he wanted to continue opening. The coach agreed, provided he adjusted to balancing both responsibilities. With runs coming consistently at the top, there was little reason to move him down the order.

Despite this outstanding season, Mosaddeak remains realistic about his career ambitions. Having played in the First Division Cricket League since 2015, he has occasionally received offers from Premier Division clubs and played a few matches at that level.

"I don't want to join a team just to warm the bench. I would like to play in the Premier Division only if I am assured of getting regular opportunities. Otherwise, I'm happy with how things are going in my career," he said.

For Mosaddeak, the priority is not the prestige of a league but the opportunity to play and perform. After years of waiting, changing positions and overcoming injury, his breakthrough season has shown what consistent opportunities and a defined role can bring.

"When I started playing, I couldn't bat in a fixed position. Sometimes I opened, sometimes I batted at seven or five. My batting position was never settled."

'Australia experience to boost Tigers'

STAR SPORTS REPORT

Bangladesh's batters are searching for lost confidence following last week's 1-0 home series defeat to the West Indies. However, they face an immediate and formidable trial by fire: Sunday's first Test against defending World Test Champions South Africa on a bouncy Wanderers track.

Historically, it is rare for even established Bangladesh batters to find their feet in South Africa. The numbers make for grim reading as mainstays Mushfiqur Rahim and Litton Das average just 22.41 and 24.75 respectively in the country, while number three Mominul Haque averages slightly over 13 across eight innings. Compounding matters, Mahmudul Hasan Joy, who became the first Bangladesh batter to hit a Test ton in South Africa during their 2022 tour, was ruled out through injury.

Despite these historical struggles, newly-appointed batting consultant Dale Benkenstein believes their recent 1-1 series draw in Australia provides the perfect blueprint for success.

"The real test will be how quickly we adapt," Benkenstein told reporters yesterday ahead of Bangladesh's second practice session in Johannesburg. "The skill set that South Africa have, they're going to come with pace and bounce. But they will have a lot of confidence having faced [Mitchell] Starc and [Josh] Hazlewood over the last couple of months.

WHAT TO WATCH

T Sports
SAFF C'ship
Semifinal
India vs Bhutan
Live from 3:00 pm
Bangladesh vs Pakistan
Live from 8:30 pm
Sony Sports 1,2,5

ACC U-19 Asia Cup
Final
India vs Pakistan
Live from 11:00 am
UEFA Nations League
Live from 1:45 am (Sunday):
Portugal vs Denmark
Romania vs Poland